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World Chronicle

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DESERTIFICATION

Ambassador Bo KJELLEN, Chairman of the United Nations Committee on Desertification, discusses the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification. The Convention offers new hope in the struggle against desertification, which is caused by human activities as well as by climate change. The Convention will be implemented through national, regional and sub-regional programmes. Local communities will play a key role in formulating these programmes. In the case of Africa, donors and recipients will work in partnership to secure the maximum benefits from the resources available. Ambassador Kjellen believes that science and technology are vital tools in the fight against desertification -- a problem primarily of sustainable development which affects the lives of hundreds of millions of people around the world.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

WILLIAMS: Sitting in for Michael Littlejohns, I'm Ian Williams, and this is World Chronicle.

Over the last few decades a dangerous and fast spreading phenomenon has been affecting almost one-sixth of the world population in more than 100 countries on all continents — desertification. It has turned millions of acres of fertile land into desert, depriving hundreds of millions of people of their livelihood. In view of the dangers of desertification and the need for collective action to protect drylands, the international community, in 1994, adopted the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification* and established the Committee on Desertification.** Our guest today, Ambassador Bo Kjellen, is Chairman of this committee. Joining me to talk with Ambassador Kjellen are Daniel Shepard of the *Earth Times* and Segun Adeyemi of the News Agency of Nigeria.

Ambassador Kjellen, welcome to World Chronicle.

KJELLEN: Thank you very much.

WILLIAMS: One of the things we have — desertification is a strange word for many of us, who live in very wet places. But I understand that desert in your context and the context of the Committee means more than sand dunes and camels. Could you perhaps explain what exactly is affected by the Committee and its work?

KJELLEN: I think that's an important question. When you say desertification, which is sometimes a word which is not very liked by the scientists, it gives the impression indeed of the dunes of Sahara moving southwards all the time. Now we understand it's a much more subtle problem, with land degradation in drylands areas. And this is of course in itself an extremely dangerous situation, because, as you pointed out initially, there are millions and millions of people who are — hundreds of millions of people who are affected by this.

SHEPARD: Millions of dollars of assistance have gone to stricken drylands such as the Sahel in Africa since famine devastated that area years ago. How does the treaty change the way that assistance is used?

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* The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa (17 June 1994).

** Intergovernmenteal Negotiating Committee for the Elaboration of an International Convention to Combat Desertification (INCD).

KJELLEN: Well, we would hope that it would lead to a new way of tackling these problems. You can say that this is perhaps also a way of making development cooperation work in a new way. There are some pillars of this Convention which I think are important. One is the bottom-up approach, the participation of local populations. And the Convention actually means that the Governments have committed themselves to create an enabling environment for this, for the women and men in the villages to have an active participation themselves. Another pillar is the coordination between donors — we should not use money in the wrong way. And finally, and I think this is very important, is to bring together various elements of development. One believed at one stage perhaps that you could improve the situation simply by planting what was called green belts — trees and so on. Now we understand that this is a complex of various measures, including land management, water management, but also socioeconomic factors, such as land ownership rights, the rights of women, and so on.

ADEYEMI: The United Nations Environment Programme has actually estimated that it will cost about $10 to $22 billion over 20 years to combat desertification. And this is a lot of money, particularly for the countries that are most affected — the African countries. Where will these resources come from?

KJELLEN: There are already quite a lot of resources going to these countries. In fact, many of the drought-stricken countries have received a lot of resources, but maybe they have not always been used in the best possible way, for the reasons that I mentioned — for instance, bad coordination among donors and so on. But the Convention itself does not create any new money; rather it creates, through what is called the global mechanism, a financial structure, the possibilities of mobilising more money for the drylands.

SHEPARD: If I may follow up, I understand that the Convention on Climate Change*, for example, has what you call financial mechanisms which will raise money to finance it, but there's nothing like that for the Convention on Desertification.

KJELLEN: The financial mechanism of the Convention on Climate Change, of course, that's the GEF, Global Environment Facility, that is being used for that. But we have to remember then that on climate there was hardly any money flowing when we made the Convention. On desertification we are, in a way, on a train that is already running. But speaking of the GEF, it's important to say that the GEF has decided that problems of land degradation can also be financed through GEF projects to the extent that they would also have an impact on, for instance, climate change, which is not so difficult to see the link, since growing vegetation is also a reservoir for CO_2.

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* United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (9 May 1992).

SHEPARD: One of the major criticisms of the UN system is that there's so much duplication and overlap. Why is it necessary to have a special institution or body working on desertification? Shouldn't the development agencies be doing this on their own? Shouldn't the women's agencies be promoting women's empowerment? Why do we need a separate organization, so to speak, for desertification?

KJELLEN: Well, I think it is — the important element here is that the Convention is a legally binding document. It has formally entered into force; there are now 62 countries that have ratified it. And this means that they take on the commitment, for instance, to create the good conditions for women to be able to work and to make their contribution to the country's development. I don't think it's a panacea. It's quite clear that any convention is only — it's dependent on how it will be implemented. But my feeling is, and my strong hope is, that this Convention — which is really based on the Rio process also, which is a strength for it, the notion of sustainable development, and it's perhaps the most typical example of all the Rio documents that link development and environment — that against that basis, against that background, the Convention will act as a sort of dynamo, a powerhouse, for more research, more action, on the grounds of a new situation in the drylands, recognizing that this is a problem of global significance, that it is really a threat when 1 billion people live in the drylands and are at risk for desertification and drought.

WILLIAMS: Ambassador, the Convention, I think even its title, its very long title, explicitly mentions Africa, and you're talking about the resources. How would those resources compare with the amount that, say, the IMF and the World Bank take out of Africa every year in interest payments? Bearing in mind that this then forces poor people to encroach on marginal lands with uses for agriculture and pastoralism which they're not suited for. Couldn't you say that the financial institution, the North, is giving a very little amount with one hand while taking away far much more with the other hand, and thereby really exacerbating the problem?

KJELLEN: Well, I think the discussion about the structural adjustment programmes and the way in which this has been handled has been criticized on many scores, in particular with the poorest countries. At the same time I'm firmly convinced that also the drylands in poorer countries, they need to have an economy which is operating in an orderly way. They have to have good economic policies also. Then you can always discuss what these policies should be. As for the World Bank, you're right. I mean, the World Bank has many more resources than any of the other institutions, of course, and that's why I was pleased to participate in September, for instance, in a conference organized by the World Bank on rural well-being, where actually the situation in the drylands was addressed, with quite a lot of interest. And while we realize that the World Bank is now also understanding that such

things as micro-loans, for instance, to the villages are perhaps a way of creating new possibilities for development.

WILLIAMS: But the problem in the past has been not micro-loans but mega-loans to corrupt military dictators which have been recycled to Swiss banks, with the connivance of the international community, quite often. And they've left the people in these countries now to pay for them.

KJELLEN: Yes. But in that perspective, of course, I think that we can all be pleased with the kind of advances you have in Africa with regard to democracy. I think that's a very important element. I don't say that the Convention has created this situation, but it's quite clear that if you want to have a convention that is really efficient and that deals with the matters on the basis of participation at the local level, then democracy is, in itself, a very important element. And I can mention countries like Mali, for instance, where there have been very definite advances of democracy.

ADEYEMI: Mr. Ambassador, talking about Africa, no continent is more affected by this problem than Africa. There are 250 million people in the world today who are affected by this problem, and about 1 billion others also within the wings. My question is, while we are waiting for the implementation of this programme, do you have any priority projects or programmes for Africa in the interim that would help to alleviate the problems of desertification?

KJELLEN: Yes. I think one of the important aspects of this is that when we concluded the negotiations in June '94, then we decided also to start an urgent action programme for Africa, which meant really that the Convention on the African continent would start in advance. The African countries are now working to establish their national action programmes, the national desertification funds; the donors are organizing themselves to support this as is foreseen in the Convention. And you can say that as the Convention is now entering into force, through this urgent action for Africa, we have already — we are already on the runway ready to take off, much better than if we had not had this. And also for me it's an expression of the solidarity with Africa. This Convention was launched by the Africans, actually, and I think that we have to realize that this is also an expression of the confidence in Africa's future.

ADEYEMI: If I may follow up, what has been the impact of the urgent action for Africa so far?

KJELLEN: What we heard when we discussed this in the Committee the other day is certainly that there is a lot of activity going on, but that it is not enough; that the Convention is not yet sufficiently well known by the development ministries, the finance ministries in the affected countries, and by the development cooperation agencies in the

OECD countries. So there is a lot of work to be done, but certainly what I got out of that discussion was in particular the tremendous activity of making the Convention a success.

ADEYEMI: Will there be a public awareness programme to bring this to the attention of people?

KJELLEN: Yes, there are lots of public awareness actions taking place already. There are national conferences, regional conferences in the countries. There are efforts to go out at the local level. The women are very active. I have had meetings with women here, representatives of the grassroots organizations. But we face many problems of course in awareness-building. It's the language problem — you go into the villages, you have to have the local language, and so on. So certainly it's not difficult to find the problems.

SHEPARD: The Convention puts a premium on local participation and the bottom-up approach. In practice, does this actually happen, or do schemes still percolate down from government level, regional level and development organizations?

KJELLEN: Oh, I think they do, but you have to start the process somewhere indeed here. And I think the very fact that this is the very principle of this Convention, that one should start from the bottom up, would be an appeal to everybody that we need changed methods. And I think for all of us who have been working on development cooperation, it's a fact, of course, that the present methods have not always worked very well if the people in the villages don't feel ownership of the projects.

WILLIAMS: This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Ambassador Bo Kjellen, Chairman of the United Nations Committee on Desertification.

And if I could use up my prerogatives, concerning the Climate Change Convention there was a considerable amount of — I won't say pseudo-scientific, but a lot of scientific papers were brought forward to suggest that the climate change process wasn't as bad as people suspected. And I have seen some scientific papers that suggest that desertification is in fact just a cyclical process in the weather, and that given time the desert swings to and fro in a regular cycle. Have you had much problem trying to deal with such, quote, "scientific", unquote, studies, or do you accept that they might have a point?

KJELLEN: Well, it's quite clear that the scientific battle is not raging in the same way as it is for climate, because that has much more of a direct impact on our own policies — for instance, for energy and transports and so on. But there is, among others, a Swedish scientist who is of the opinion that this is, as you say, a more cyclical development. But the definition we have in the Convention says that desertification is really land degradation in the arid areas that is caused both by climatic reasons and by human activities. And I think that's the essential thing. We can't influence very much the climate, but we can influence the human activities, and it's quite clear that you have these very fragile lands,

particularly in Africa. If there is an increase in population, if there is an increase in the cattle population, and so on, then you get grave problems.

WILLIAMS: Segun.

ADEYEMI: I was going to say that, apart from the bottom-up approach, what is new in this programme that will make a lot of difference, considering the fact that this is not the first time that any action has been taken against desertification? So there has to be something that is new this time around that is giving you so much confidence that this will succeed.

KJELLEN: Well, I think the first thing is that it is a legally binding document that has been signed by Governments and ratified by parliaments. The plan of action to combat desertification that was adopted in 1977 was a good programme, I think, but it had flaws in it and it never really took on. Now I think we have the great advantage of seeing this in the context of the overall Rio follow-up. We will now get strength, this year, for instance, here in the United Nations, by the preparations and the carrying-out of the special session of the General Assembly on the Rio follow-up. We expect to get political support at the highest level then for our first meeting of the Conference of the Parties. So at that level I think there is a difference. But I also think that the very strong scientific content of this and the desire through the Committee on Science and Technology of the Conference of the Parties to bring together scientists of different disciplines to really treat with these issues is important. I think we have managed to put the problem of desertification on the map still more than before, and we will see that also strengthened through this special session, when, for instance, the issue of water availability in the world will be one of the main issues. Because water is really just a reflection of the problem of drylands.

ADEYEMI: But considering the magnitude of this problem, one would have expected that you would have more than 62 countries to have ratified it up to date. Do you expect an increase in this number before your Conference of the Parties?

KJELLEN: Well, you know, the Convention was actually signed by 115 countries, and most of these signatures were made in Paris in October 1994. We had a very rapid ratification process. The 50th ratification, which sparked the entry into force, was in September, and the reports we have now are that there are a great number of countries that are very advanced in their parliamentary processes. I think that when we come to the first Conference of the Parties in late September, I think we will have about 80 or 90 ratifications by then. Which means that these are the parties to the Convention at that stage.

SHEPARD: Do you think the ratification of the treaty by the United States will be critical to the treaty's success?

KJELLEN: Yes, we very much wish the United States to ratify as soon as possible, and certainly before the 30th of June, which is the date limit to be a party when we come to the Conference of the Parties. And what I hear is that the prospects are good.

SHEPARD: I wanted to ask, the free market has been hailed as sort of a solution to all development problems. How does this fit into the Desertification Convention scheme?

KJELLEN: Well, we hope to see the private sector participate a little more. That was a point that was made, for instance, by the delegate of Switzerland in our discussions yesterday. Now, my answer is, of course, that we know that when it comes to sustainable development the free market is not something which can solve all the problems. And recently I saw that even Mr. Soros has written an article about this. I personally think that we have to realize that there may be new theories, new ideas that have to come up. And in particular when it comes to drylands, of course, you can't say that you'll have important investment in countries which are very poor and so on if there is not enough infrastructure. Now, there may be changes in this, if you look at the possibilities of solar power, for instance. If there can be electricity production on a larger scale in drylands, then this might change this situation.

WILLIAMS: So far, Ambassador, you've outlined a lot of committees, a lot of conventions, and many cynics would say that these will contribute a lot of hot air to the process, which isn't conducive to stopping desertification. Are there any solid examples we can point to where the work of the Committee and the Convention has turned back the desert, has made it green?

KJELLEN: I certainly would not be able to give you such an example, but what I can say is that the real purpose of the work that we are doing is of course to create the instruments, the tools, for the people who are the real agents of development and combatting desertification, namely, the people in the villages. They are the real experts on this. We are the experts on making recommendations and resolutions and texts. We work with words, but they work with the reality. And we have to give them the best possible conditions.

WILLIAMS: Could you describe the reality? Could you say what it is you're asking these people to do that would turn it back? What can they feasibly do that doesn't make them poorer and hungrier than they are already?

KJELLEN: Well, I think they would have to — as in all these circumstances, they would have to be given possibilities by economic development, by the policies of the State. It's a question of policies. You don't — it's not just by plans or projects that you solve problems. You have to have good policies in these countries for development, and you have to give the people a chance themselves of creating these opportunities. Now, I have seen in

Burkina Faso for instance the effects that a cooperative movement among farmers can have in the spreading information about simple but efficient methods to —

WILLIAMS: Like what, please? Could you answer that?

KJELLEN: Yes, yes, I can certainly. There, you know, they have what they call in French the *diguettes*, they are small rows of stones which you can put out to stop erosion when the rains come and keep it there so that it can come in. There are small holes that you can dig, and you can sow in those, and you can have manure in them during the dry season, and then you put these seeds in at the time when the rains come, and it will not be disappearing in the landscape. So, I mean, these are simple methods, and my hope is that the Convention will be able to multiply very much this exchange of information on such simple methods. It strikes me, as I look at pictures from the drylands, that really they look more or less the same, if you look at China or in Africa and so on. And certainly methods that have been developed in one part of the world can be very, very useful in another. So I think that this is a way of using this Convention.

ADEYEMI: Concerning the location of the secretariat of the Convention, I understand a number of countries have indicated their willingness to host it, which is an indication of the importance attached to your work.

WILLIAMS: Or the importance of getting the money.

ADEYEMI: I was wondering if you have taken any position on the country that will host the secretariat.

KJELLEN: No, we haven't. There will, I think, be a vote at the first Conference of the Parties. As you know, the countries — or the cities are Bonn, Montreal and Murcia in Spain. As you say, I'm pleased that there are important countries that wish to have this secretariat. It will cost them in fact a lot of money. They have given generous offers with regard to support to the secretariat and so on. This is, of course, a question of the kind that you referred to before, that is certainly not directly helping the people in the drylands, but nevertheless you have to have the secretariat somewhere, and I would also say that I — what I have seen of the work of the interim secretariat during this period is that a good secretariat can make a difference in helping people to solve their problems.

WILLIAMS: Daniel.

SHEPARD: Do you seen a big change in the way the donors are working together on assistance programmes? And also, how many of the affected dryland countries have made their national programmes?

KJELLEN: Well, with regard to the donors, I think that this comes at a time when there is a lot of reflection on how development cooperation should be carried out. So I think that what I've seen of different OECD meetings and so on is that they are really ready

to consider changes, and that they are looking towards this Convention as a good example. If I may make some publicity for Sweden, I think these are methods that we have used for quite some time in our development cooperation. As for the national action programmes, they are not yet ready. I mean, they started this about a year ago, it had to be prepared. But I think — and I would certainly hope and expect that they will be operating within a year in many countries.

ADEYEMI: Well, I was just wondering if you could give us the names of some of the countries that have offered to host the secretariat, and if you have gotten any from any African country.

KJELLEN: No, the three countries that have offered to host the secretariat are Germany, Canada and Spain, and there is no offer from any African country.

WILLIAMS: What criteria will be used?

KJELLEN: Well, there are no particular criteria. We have to look at this in terms of the — well, the countries will —

WILLIAMS: None of them are desert countries, are they?

KJELLEN: No, they are not desert countries, but I think the criteria will simply be what the member countries, the contracting parties, feel can give the best conditions for the work of the secretariat. Any vote of this kind is a sort of beauty contest, of course, but — and the countries concerned are very interested in presenting themselves. But we have managed to keep it at a fairly equal level.

WILLIAMS: Very briefly, when do you expect the headquarters to be set up?

KJELLEN: I think that probably it will be towards the end of 1998. Right now the interim secretariat is in Geneva, so it has to move. But you have to remember that in the meantime the interim secretariat is operating.

WILLIAMS: Well, Ambassador Kjellen, 1998 is a long way off, but that's all the time we have now. So thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guest has been Ambassador Bo Kjellen, Chairman of the United Nations Committee on Desertification. He was interviewed by Daniel Shepard of the *Earth Times* and Segun Adeyemi of the News Agency of Nigeria.

Sitting in for Michael Littlejohns, I'm Ian Williams. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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